

**TITLE:**

The Issue of Teacher Accountability: A South Australian Perspective

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# **The Issue of Teacher Accountability: A South Australian Perspective**

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## **Introduction**

According to Abelman and Elmore (1999), teacher accountability policies which are bureaucratic and managerial in nature tend to target teachers with the view that such policies will bring about change to individual teaching. For O'Day (2002), these policies are implemented to bring about organisational change through external mechanisms. However, not all accountability policies achieve their intended purpose because some fail to bring about the desired change. The reason for failure is that the 'combined actions' of teachers is needed to bring about effective change because 'groups are the most effective unit of change if the goal is to alter the educational system' (Louis, Febey and Schroeder, 2005, paragraph 12). In addition, Spillane, Reiser and Reimer (2002) argue that it is the school situation that defines rather than affecting practice and implementation of learning and that implementation is the interaction between the many teachers and situations involved in the process of change within a school. Also, the success of accountability practices is dependent on alignment, that is, the cohesion between individual teacher practice and collective expectations and action (Elmore, 2005). Thus, it is important to consider that teachers are the controllers of their own practice and have the influence on the accountability policies that seek to contain them Macbeth (2008).

## **Defining 'Accountability'**

Writers on the topic of educational reform use the term 'teacher accountability' in numerous and different ways. Some create their own definition for the word, while others decry the lack of consistency in its use. Ouston, Fidler and Earley (1998, p. 111) note that although the term is widely used as if it were straightforward, it must be viewed as 'vague and incoherent'. This view is shared by Kuchapski (1998) who notes that:

*The pervasiveness of accountability as a method of reforming teachers' work suggests there is a high degree of clarity surrounding the term, and a great deal of thought has gone into establishing the principles and elements that undergrid the concept to ensure that the processes and mechanisms developed in its name are conceptually coherent. (p. 1)*

However, this is not the case. Kuchapski (1998, pp. 1–2) argues that ‘despite an outpouring of resources to make public education more accountable, it can be stated with some confidence that in practical and theoretical terms, the area [of accountability] is a mess and the concept is in urgent need of rehabilitation’. This is so because ‘definitions of accountability are based on values, political ideologies, and epistemologies’ (MacPherson, 1998, p. 4), all of which have resulted in the term being described as ‘complex’, ‘vague and rhetorical’, and ‘slippery’ (Kuchapski, 1998, p. 2).

Newmann, King and Rigdon (1997) describe the historical concept of ‘teacher accountability’ as a relationship between a provider of a service and the agent who has the power to reward, punish or replace the provider. These writers select a definition that is an adaptation of that proposed by other writers: “‘teacher accountability’ is a process by which school districts and states attempt to ensure that schools and school systems meet their goals’ (p. 42); the implication being that teachers are responsible for student performance.

Frymier (1996) aligns accountability to the concept of evaluation. For him, to be accountable means having a sense of responsibility. In order to assess one’s responsibility, one has to judge performance against a criterion which involves evaluating. In this case, accountability means evaluating teachers to ensure that teaching standards are met. However, he concludes that, in most of its present forms, ‘teacher accountability’ is an instrument of control rather than a vehicle for improvement.

MacPherson (1998, p. 4) argues that ‘the definitions of [teacher] accountability is closely associated with blunt instruments, crude tests, traumatic inspections, the abuse of power, and when all else fails, massive organizational restructuring’. Of concern to MacPherson (1998) is that these accountability measures appear to serve the purpose of ‘increasing the degree of control over teachers and schools . . . accountability strategies and mechanisms are implemented largely without any justification’ (p. 4). In other words, there is no genuineness for its use in teachers’ work other than being a systematic collection, analysis and use of information to hold schools, teachers and others responsible for student performance.

In order to explain ‘teacher accountability’ more completely and expand the level of understanding on how the term is being used, a summary of the major aspects and components of the concept is provided below.

### **Politics and Ideology of Teacher Accountability**

Currently, education has become a very high profile issue for politicians. This has been mainly in response to alleged public demands for improvements in pupil learning that continue to drive the reform movement. As Elmore (1999, p. 8) states, ‘[teacher] accountability for student performance is one of the two or three—if not the most—prominent issue in policy at the state and local levels now’. As a result of this trend, there is extensive involvement of local, state and federal officials in matters relating to education. What we are witnessing is a marked increase in the levels of involvement by politicians in the administration and management of educational systems in most countries of the world.

Similar attention has also been paid to the issue of ‘teacher accountability’ in South Australia. Since 1996, with the arrival of the Department of Education, Training and Employment, a view emerged that the existing policy of performance management required some modification, specifically making it more relevant to all employees. Hence in 2000, a review of the policy was initiated. In addition, a set of guidelines has been developed to assist leaders and education employees in the implementation of effective performance management practices (Spreadbury, 2001).

According to the *DETE Performance management guidelines* (2000, p. 7), ‘Performance management is a process by which staff members are able to clarify work objectives and learning is promoted. Skills are developed in order to contribute to the broader goals of the organisation’. Further, the *Guidelines* direct that ‘Staff members are obliged to be involved in performance management processes that enable them to be effective in their work’ (p. 7). According to Brown (1998):

*It is difficult to argue with the notion that employees of the government sector should be publicly accountable not only for the performance of their work, but for continually striving to improve what they do in the interests of the communities they ‘serve’.* (p. 31)

However, in analysing articles that address the politics of ‘teacher accountability’, MacPherson, Cibulka, Monk and Wong (1998) conclude that there is a need to

acknowledge, to accept, and to respond proactively to the central role of politics in the administration and management of educational systems. They maintain that, too often, passive reactions such as denial, selective attention, aggression, and even disregard of legitimate interests occur. If 'teacher accountability' practices are to succeed, they must be educative in nature, and open to change as teachers learn from experience. Further, Kuchapski (1998, p. 4) argues that 'to make sense of accountability it is necessary to identify first the dominant normative theories, that is, statements of the desirable purposes and modes of accountability'.

Stemming from the above argument, there is now the need to ascertain to whom teachers should be accountable to and for what purpose.

### **Accountability to Whom and for What?**

As argued earlier, the issue of accountability is rather dubious in nature. To whom are teachers and administrators held responsible and for what? Darling-Hammond writes, 'The issue of educational accountability is probably the most pressing and problematic of any facing the public schools today' (Darling-Hammond, Lieberman, McLaughlin & Miller, 1992, p. 21). What does professional accountability mean? 'In the current debates about accountability, cacophony rules. There is little agreement and perhaps less clear thinking, about what accountability means, to whom it is owed and how it can be operationalised' (Darling-Hammond, Lieberman, McLaughlin & Miller, 1992, p. 21).

Becher, Eraut and Knight (1981) suggest three categories of accountability:

- *Moral accountability to those affected by one's action*
- *contractual accountability to one's employer*
- *Professional accountability to the standards one sets oneself and one's professional aims, beliefs and mission.* (cited in Kremer-Hayon, 1993, p. 4)

Becher, Eraut and Knight (1981) focus on the individual teacher's accountability. They argue that teachers have a moral and professional responsibility to embrace their personal development in a proactive manner and to take ownership of their professional growth. Furthermore, they maintain that the schools should make the pursuit of such growth part of the contractual responsibilities for all teachers. Focussing on the institutional perspective, Darling-Hammond (1990) adds academic

discipline standards as well as professional standards to the above list. She defines a meaningful system of accountability in three areas. Such a system should:

1. *Set educationally meaningful and defensible standards for what parents and members of the general public can expect of a school system, school, or teacher;*
2. *Establish reasonable and feasible means by which these standards can be implemented and upheld; and*
3. *Provide for avenues of redress or corrections in practice when these standards are not met, so that ultimately the students are well served.*  
(Darling-Hammond, Lieberman, McLaughlin & Miller, 1992, p. 22)

However, accountability ‘is more complex and contested than the commonsense understanding of “answerability” or “responsibility” would suggest’ (Vidovich & Slee, 2000, p. 2). Vidovich and Slee (2000) argue that different typologies have been constructed around the question of ‘accountability to whom’ and they present two typologies in order to answer this debatable question.

Firstly, they present Corbett’s (1992) four-fold typology of public sector accountability in which accountability is seen as ‘operating upwards, outwards, downwards and inwards’ (Vidovich & Slee, 2000, p. 2). To elaborate:

- Upward accountability is a more traditional kind in which teachers are obligated to meet legal and constitutional requirements;
- Outwards accountability requires teacher liaison with the relevant stakeholders in education;
- Downward accountability ensures that principals and coordinators are accountable to the teachers under their charge; and
- Inward accountability requires teachers to be accountable to themselves.  
(Vidovich & Slee, 2000, p. 3).

Secondly, Vidovich and Slee (2000, p. 3) make reference to Ball, Vincent and Radnor’s (1997) two broad categories of accountability—market and political. The former category involves meeting contractual requirements with clients by providing efficient services through cost saving managerial practices. The latter category, political activity, requires that politicians to be accountable to the electorate through the establishment of closer and more direct links with the masses.

## **Conclusion**

According to Larsen (2005, p. 292) ‘teacher evaluation policies have spread rapidly throughout the world over the past decade, implemented as quick-fix solutions to assure the public that governments are addressing educational problems’. In most instances, these accountability reforms are driven neo-liberal business imperatives imposed by the state onto teachers. In essence, what we have is a situation whereby the state is still in a position to control the work of teachers.

It is for this reason that Borman, Kromrey, Hines and Hogarty (2002) argue that it is imperative for policy makers to recognise that teachers experiencing change initiatives required by state-mandated accountability measures will ignore, sabotage, adapt, or adopt them. Teachers, who view bureaucratic change initiatives as an affront to their sense of professional efficacy, are likely to resist change (Leithwood, 2005). In order to overcome this dilemma, Desimone (2002) suggests that effective teacher professional development programs are a key factor in the adoption of school reform policies. To elaborate, Desimone (2002) maintains that teachers must receive specific and structured guidelines, which will result in faster adoption by teachers and make teachers more inclined to accept mandated accountability policies

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